



Symposium on Christology
Doctrinal Faithfulness in an Age of Theological Accommodation

Pluralism and the Exclusivity of Christ:
A Canadian Historical Anabaptist Overview
Ian Rennie, Ontario Theological Seminary

May I begin by saying how delighted I am by what you are attempting to do in this symposium? As I see it you are dealing with theology, which is always foundational for the life of the Christian and the church. More than that, you are dealing with a key issue in contemporary theological concern - the question of pluralism. Then you are dealing with the subject, as I would see it, from the proper theological vantage point, namely that of Christology. And theology is always relevant when the person and work of our Lord are brought to bear upon it.

While I am overjoyed at what you are seeking to accomplish, may I also add that I am not certain that I have much to offer. This symposium is looking at the question, perfectly appropriately, from an Anabaptist perspective, but I am afraid that I can lay no claim to such a pedigree. In fact it was once said at Regent College that when J.A. Toews and Rennie taught the Reformation on successive years, any similarity was purely coincidental. Nor is my advanced training in theology, and as an administrator, the little time that I am able to grab for serious scholarly reading, must be given to my own field of church history. Although the title for this paper does include the word 'historical', I am not sure that my limited knowledge of modern Canadian Anabaptist theological discussion can do much even to set the subject in its proper historical context.

When I expressed my hesitancy, however, to several of the organizers of this symposium, they assured me that I would be regarded as a sympathetic and vaguely knowledgeable observer, whose contribution would be placed in the undemanding category labelled as 'impressions.' So I hope that the following comments may make a slight contribution to a denomination of Christians from whom I have received much, helping them, with all churches in Canada and throughout the world, to exalt Jesus Christ as he so richly deserves. Thus I shall attempt to make my comments around the foci of Christology and pluralism with some awareness of historical setting.

I. The Present Situation

1. To my knowledge the best contemporary survey of the situation of Christology and pluralism is Paul F. Knitter, No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions, published in 1985. He outlines four Christian approaches. There is the theocentric model, which is the most liberal, and which the author himself espouses. Then there is the post-Vatican II Catholic model, with such a stress upon the objective accomplishments of Jesus Christ, that the followers of all religions - and even those of none - may be embraced in the category of anonymous Christians. There is also the mainline Protestant model, which Knitter affirms lays stress upon the active revelation of God in history in a very positive way, but sees salvation only in Jesus Christ. Then there is the conservative evangelical model. From my observations, I would think that there has been some shift since Knitter began to prepare his material almost a decade ago. This I would see particularly in Protestantism, with the mainline shifting toward a more theocentric model, and some evangelicals beginning to follow them at a lengthy distance.
2. In seeking to understand Christology and pluralism in context, my first observation is that a consistently liberal theology radically changes Christology with or without the presence of pluralism. If liberal theology posits the core of the knowledge of God within some aspect of the human consciousness - be it conscience, the sense of ultimate dependence, reason expressed dialectically, values in community, ultimate concern, etc. - then it is not to be wondered at that this theology shifts from an ontological to a functional Christology. While such a theology will retain Christological categories and vocabulary within the milieu of Christendom, the inherent logic of liberalism means that even these are consistently weakened. The secularization of society - to which liberal theology makes its own contribution - only intensifies this process. For with liberal theology still following Schleiermacher's dictum that one of the tasks of Christian theology is to make itself relevant to the cultural elite who despise it, by making it palatable to them, then a secularized elite must be met with a more secularized Christology, for which Knitter's title of theocentric would be more suitable. Pluralism is simply, from another perspective, encouraging this tendency which is already well down the road.

3. My second observation on the present scene is that in much of mainline Protestantism we have a blessed inconsistency. While liberal theology, with its accompanying Christology, is hard at work, there are forces working for orthodox theology. Theological traditions which are valued - though sometimes more with emotion than understanding, renewal subgroups which consistently produce ministerial candidates, and the pragmatic consideration that without some evangelical infusion Protestant institutions tend to wither, all encourage orthodoxy. So the Bible is taken seriously concerning the claims and authority of Jesus, but at the same time there is no hesitancy to acknowledge that on occasion our Lord's commissioned messengers made egregious blunders, while even Jesus himself hardly seems in Chalcedonian fashion to display that he was fully divine as well as fully human. Pluralism, however, may break this tension, and cause a move in a more consistently liberal direction. One would assume that some Mennonites, with their predilection for mainstream Protestantism would be involved in these developments.
4. My final impression is that evangelicals are the champions of orthodox Christology in relation to pluralism. This is particularly interesting since evangelicalism is inundated at the present time - with no hint of diminution - by visible minorities who are converts ~~from~~ other religious backgrounds, many of whom are well trained academically in their traditional religion. Of particular importance would seem to be the fact that if there is questioning among some evangelicals about orthodox Christology and pluralism, it is not coming from these people. When it does come from evangelicals I am saddened at the lack of theological rigor that can be evidenced. Rather than a comprehensive examination of the biblical data, a few sections of Scripture are dealt with, while many others relevant to the question are left unmentioned. The principle of omission is different from the principle of rejection, but in practice the result is similar. The great historical heritage of orthodox Christology also sadly seems to be omitted on too many occasions. //

II. Suggestions for MB Response

1. Stress orthodox theology
 - a. In the proper relationship of orthodox Christology and pluralism, it is necessary to place the prior and prime emphasis on the former. Only in this way can we properly meet with and relate to those of other religions.

- b. Orthodox theology, in all its aspects including Christology, is the gracious and saving self-revelation of the infinite, eternal and unchanging God, in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, by the Bible, to a humanity which has sinned and rebelled against him, and has been experiencing the judgment of his withdrawal, leaving them under the power of evil, in corruption, confusion and the fear of death, but at the same time full of self-confidence and self-righteousness, seeking by religions to find the way back to God.
- c. In his divine-human person, Jesus Christ has lived as God intended, given himself as an offering for sin, and been raised from death over every evil power. He is the universal lord. He is lord of Christians and of the church, and is sovereignly lord over all things - ideas, movements, institutions, occurrences - for the growth of the church (Ephesians 1:22). He is the rightful lord of all people and ethnic groups (Matthew 28:18-19) and sends out Christians in the gracious power of his risen life, to exalt and exhibit him. Only such a one as Jesus could deal with the power of Satan and sin tragically embedded in all life. And there is no other loving God-man in the universe.
- d. It is along with the communication of this message that God has chosen to pour out his Spirit (I Corinthians 1:18-25). Thus the presence of the message of orthodox theology, with moral and material miracles accompanying, regenerates and brings to repentance and faith in Christ sinners of all religions, and more is the assurance that people of every diversity are being brought to salvation, and the guarantee that the triumph of Jesus will be fully realized. All that has to be done to reap bountifully, is thus to sow.
- e. This orthodox theology has been grasped in a special way by certain theologians at particular times, especially in the fourth and fifth centuries by Athanasius, Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, Jerome and Augustine; and in the sixteenth century by Luther and Calvin. The whole church has drawn upon these theologians through the centuries, and continues with thanksgiving to do so today.

assumption
Orthodoxy is deadness

Baye questions

- f. It is well to remember that orthodoxy goes hand in hand with life. The great seasons of orthodoxy have been the times of spiritual awakening and renewal. This philosophy of history is generally denied by those of a liberal theological persuasion, who argue that life and orthodoxy are contradictions. What they are really talking about is a dead orthodoxy, which has retained the concepts and vocabulary, but which is productive of a famine of hearing the word of God, squelching the Spirit by selfishness and greed (Amos 8). So the record of history is an era of live orthodoxy, follow by an era of decline, characterized by dead orthodoxy as well as heterodoxy. In spite of its frequent academic brilliance and its claim to provide emancipation, heterodoxy invariably produces increased spiritual deadness, because it has rejected the orthodox Christology which the Holy Spirit accompanies. So live orthodoxy is both conservative and radical at the same time. It is conservative in that it adheres tenaciously to the unique, unchanging and unrepeatable, saving acts of God in history, and is radical because by the Holy Spirit the efficacy and power of these acts are brought into human lives and societies, together with increasing understanding and appropriation. In contrast, the heterodoxy of consistent liberal theology, in spite of appearances, is profoundly conservative, for it is locked into the natural.

- g. It can be salutary to keep in mind that orthodox theology does not need to be equated with certain expressions of orthodoxy, particularly when it is under great pressure. In such a situation agendas may be prepared which are too much the product of fear, and have a cast which is too defensive and narrow. This is how I would interpret the orthodoxy of Christian fundamentalism. While one can give thanks for its resistance to liberal theology, I feel under no constraint to accept its hyper-literalistic hermeneutic, its revivalistic reduction of sanctification to legalism, its disengagement from society and its attendant apocalypticism.

- h. There will almost always be difficulty in maintaining orthodox theology, because we have an Adversary who hates the truth, which the Holy Spirit uses to deliver people from bondage into Christ's kingdom.

Can't have it both ways.
e.g. Amos - had Amos want Amos!
Orthodoxy elevated
idea - in

7
(

} ?
?

||
||

||
||

1. Orthodox theology is designed to provide essential attitudes to accompany witness to Jesus Christ in a pluralistic setting. Since it is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit who have come to us with salvation, without any contribution on our part, whenever we seek to exalt Jesus Christ we must do so in humility and love. Since orthodox theology is the guarantee that people from every diverse setting will be saved, and God's purpose fulfilled, then we cannot indulge in entrepreneurialism and hucksterism, or triumphalism and coercion.

2. Be Conscious of Factors That May Make it Difficult for MBs to Maintain Orthodoxy

do we see reasons?

a. The MBs have been orthodox in theology since the founding of the denomination in 1860. Thus it can appear as simply an essential constituent of the tradition, and when one becomes a bit dissatisfied, and figures part of the heritage needs to go, then orthodox theology can easily be dismissed. This situation means that most MBs do not know by experience the spiritual deadness that anything but live orthodoxy can bring, and thus when a dry stretch appears, they may see in orthodoxy the cause instead of the solution.

b. Anabaptism has not been a ~~major~~ theological movement. While it has generally assumed an orthodox theology, its up-front emphasis has tended to be on ecclesiology, discipleship and ethics. Thus some of the great resources of orthodoxy may be devalued, because they seem not to speak to Anabaptist concerns. In this way the MBs may be more open to theologies which ostensibly address their concerns, but which actually are undercutting their foundations. *orth emphasis on this*

c. Anabaptist ecclesiology may actually encourage in some a turning from orthodox Christology. The understanding that the Constantinian church was apostate because of its alliance with the state and its power, can cause one to discount the great orthodox theologians of the fourth and fifth centuries. Anyone who could sanction such an ecclesiastical arrangement must have been a woefully inadequate theologian. Often along with this approach can go the idea that the creeds proposed by these theologians and their associates were philosophical, ontological and irrelevant, exactly what one would expect from an apostate

church. But a reading of the theological works of these theologians, such as Athanasius in The Incarnation of the Divine Word, would soon dispel this attitude. Something of the same may happen to Luther and Calvin.

7

Orthodoxy can also lead to spiritual pride

d. Anabaptist ecclesiology may also encourage spiritual pride, which is always dangerous. It can be assumed that orthodox ecclesiology is what counts, and thus secure in our spiritual pride, we can let orthodox theology slip. When this happens God can raise up a champion of the truth in a place that we cannot sanction. And this seems to be happening today. Consider the first public statement made by George Carey, the new Archbishop of Canterbury of the Church of England, noted in London's Sunday Telegram (December 23, 1990):

Let's not have any truck with bland theology, that Jesus is just one option among many. Dialogue with other faiths is very important, but I can respect another faith and a believer of that faith by saying 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation. I owe it to you to share that with you. Do with that truth what you may, but my job is to say that to you.'

e. The relations of the Brotherhood may also at times prove disadvantageous to orthodox theology. It may be like the old school-tie network. For example, during the British spy crisis of the post-World War II era, if you were a Cambridge graduate, for a long time those in high places refused to give any credence to complaints. It was only when the nation was in danger of being fatefully compromised that any action was taken, and even then it would appear only reluctantly.

7

3. Concentrate on Factors That Can Help MBs to Maintain Orthodoxy

a. The MBs have had remarkable exposure to orthodox theology. As well as that received from the Anabaptist heritage, at the time of its birth in southern Russia it gained input from Lutheran orthodoxy through Pietism, and from Calvinist orthodoxy through German Baptists and the Plymouth Brethren. Subsequent contacts with other movements have continued something of this influence. Although some Anabaptists would see this as a

*Contribution was via
no orthodoxy
& formalism*

serious mongrelization, I would see it as a helpful counter to the dangers of in-breeding and pure-breeding.

- b. The MBs are in a singular way among Anabaptists the products of movements of spiritual awakening and renewal. Although it is true that Anabaptism itself was produced by the great awakening of the Reformation, there were many ups and downs in following generations and centuries. Some North American Mennonites were strongly impacted by what historians call the Third Evangelical Awakening (c. 1857-1890), but none more so than the MBs who were born in this movement in Russia. And then in an unprecedented way there has been exposure to subsequent awakenings. As a result, along with orthodox theology, MBs have shared constantly in the vitality represented by evangelism and missions. What may be termed the Fourth Evangelical Awakening (c.1904-1910), touched the MBs in Russia and North America. Then there was intense involvement in the awakening among Russian Protestants in the 1920s. Many of these MBs fled to Canada, bringing their dynamic life in Christ with them, and having an impact on many sections of Canadian Mennonites. The movement of revitalization on the western Canadian prairies under the radio ministry of Oscar Lowery in 1938 and 1939 had some bearing on the MBs, while people in the denomination have been open to such culturally diverse renewal movements in more recent days as the prairie revival of the Sutera Brothers, the Jesus People and the Charismatic movement. Orthodox theology and spiritual life go hand in hand, and among the MBs this principle has been demonstrated, as each has strengthened the other.
- c. The MBs have many members who are first-generation believers. As I see it, this is fairly unusual among Mennonites in the western world. Healthy congregations and denominations usually need among the members those who represent a long heritage of faith, as well as those who are relatively new to the faith. The former at best can provide stability, while the latter contribute zeal. This product of renewal and evangelism helps to keep the denomination strong.

4. Remember That the MBs Have Much to Contribute in a Pluralistic World
 - a. The Anabaptist trail of blood cries out for toleration and respect. The gentleness thus bred can lead to dialogue, which can generate understanding and appreciation, giving comfort in all forms of mission from presence to witness.
 - b. MB missions abroad, and visible minority congregations in the homeland, can be an example to many other Christians.
 - c. MBs have much to contribute to other Mennonites. The smaller, evangelical Mennonite denominations can be encouraged out of the ghetto which lack of size so often produces, by a denomination which they trust. The larger Mennonite bodies, which may have greater variety in them, need the emphasis of the MBs, while many members are greatly desirous of such input.
 - d. If, as so many signs indicate, we are moving into a worldwide awakening such as has never been seen, and in which our Lord will be exalted as never before throughout the earth, the MBs will provide an important component. I can't help but believe that God has been preparing the MBs for such a time.